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SUBJECT: S/P STAFFER'S HCMC CONSULTATIONS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
ISSUES OF THE PROTESTANT COMMUNITY

REF: A) SECSTATE 29193; B) HANOI 392; C) HCMC 160; D) HCMC 142

¶11. (SBU) Summary: In meetings with visiting S/P staffer William Inboden and ConGenOffs in HCMC February 20-23, HCMC officials cited the Prime Minister's February 4 "Order on Protestantism" as evidence of the GVN's commitment to improve the climate for religious practice in Vietnam. They said the PM's Order clears the way for all Protestant denominations to register with relevant local government authorities to legalize their status. Leaders of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and Vietnam's house church movement agreed that the overall climate for religious practice has improved, even in a number of Central Highlands provinces. They enthusiastically welcomed the PM's Order on Protestantism. However, they pointed to continued religious freedom violations, particularly in a number of provinces in the Northern and Central Highlands, and the slow process of church recognition as evidence that the PM's order may not be sufficient to rein in hard-line and obstructionist local officials. They hope that GVN-USG dialogue on religious freedom will encourage Vietnam to produce a legal framework that streamlines overlapping and sometimes restrictive rules that govern religious practice in Vietnam, and that expedites the registration of churches. Ideally, such a legal framework would minimize the discretion of local officials. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) Policy Planning Staffer William Inboden visited HCMC from February 20-23 to assess religious freedom developments in the context of USG-GVN discussions on an action plan to improve religious freedom in Vietnam (ref A). This cable focuses on the status of the recognized and unrecognized Protestant churches and their reaction to recent GVN initiatives. Discussions on the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and on the status of imprisoned Mennonites Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang and Le Thi Hong Lien will be reported septel.

The Government and Party: Vietnam is making real progress

¶13. (SBU) In separate meetings, Deputy Head of the HCMC External Relations Office Nguyen Hung Quoc, the Deputy Head of the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Vo Ngoc Hue, and the Vice Chairman of the HCMC Fatherland Front Tran Trung Tinh emphasized that the PM's February 4 Order on Protestantism (ref B) is but the latest step in the GVN's efforts to foster religious freedom. They stressed that the GVN welcomes the growing role of religious organizations in social and charitable efforts, particularly in combating HIV/AIDS (ref C). The Vice Chair of the Fatherland Front said that the GVN approach to religion in the Central and Northern Highlands was to prevent the "abuse of religion" and the use of religion to encourage separatism, particularly in remote areas among impressionable ethnic minorities. While defending the prosecution of Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang (ref D) for creating "social disorder," he said he hoped Quang and his wife might be able to carry out religious activities in accordance with the law in the future.

¶14. (SBU) The CRA deputy told us that over the next few days the Central Government will organize instructional meetings in Hanoi and HCMC to guide provincial officials in implementing the PM's order on Protestantism. He maintained that the PM's order was sufficient legal basis for Protestant groups to apply for registration and legalization of status. He said that for registration, a group must certify its membership, identify its leader, who need not be an ordained minister, and demonstrate that they have a wish to assemble together to conduct religious services.

¶15. (SBU) According to the CRA Deputy, all Protestant denominations are eligible to register to legalize their operations under the PM's Order. At a later stage they would be able to apply for GVN recognition, which is a more complex process governed by the Ordinance on Religion and pending implementation guidelines for the ordinance. Hue said the implementation guidelines would be issued by mid-March; the GVN has gone through five drafts already. However, the Fatherland Front Vice Chairman said the implementation guidelines would not be issued before April.

¶16. (SBU) The CRA and Fatherland Front differed on whether the Ordinance on Religion and the PM's Order on Protestantism superseded the 1999 Decree 26 on religion, which, *inter alia*, made non-recognized house churches illegal under Vietnamese law. The CRA Deputy told us that Decree 26 is no longer in effect. However, the Vice Chair of the HCMC Fatherland Front told us that

only "certain" portions of Decree 26 were rendered obsolete and the remainder of the Decree remained in force. Leaders of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and key Protestant house church leaders told us that Decree 26 continues to be cited by local government and police officials as justification for taking action against non-recognized churches.

The SECV

17. (SBU) Pastors Thai Phuoc Truong, Duong Thanh and Phan Quang Thieu, senior members of the executive board of the SECV (all strictly protect), said the climate for religious freedom in Vietnam continues to improve. They welcomed the PM's Order on Protestantism after having reviewed unofficial drafts publicized on the internet. In the SECV's view, one of the most significant improvements of the order was that it appears to direct provincial and local People's Committees to register new churches. In the SECV's view this is a critical improvement as prior instructions were issued through the Committee for Religious Affairs, which has no authority over provincial governments.

18. (SBU) In response to the PM's order, the SECV has begun to consider a new push to register its approximately 600 unrecognized churches. Before moving ahead, the SECV awaits official notification from the GVN as to how the PM's order will be implemented. The SECV also desires a detailed explanation on how the order will mesh with other rules and regulations governing religious practice in Vietnam, including the yet-to-be issued implementing guidelines for the Ordinance on Religion.

19. (SBU) The SECV leadership told us that they are taking this cautious approach because of their past negative experience in working with the GVN on the recognition of new churches. They noted that almost immediately after the GVN recognized the SECV in 2001 it also recognized some 400 SECV churches. However, since then, GVN recognition of other churches has been frustratingly slow. They said that in 2003, after the Central Committee for Religious Affairs issued a directive on "normalization of operation of churches in the Central Highlands," the SECV submitted a list of churches to the various provincial authorities for registration. Almost all those applications were denied; local authorities cited Decree 26 as justification for their denial. At this point, the SECV desires -- at a minimum -- for its churches to be allowed to operate normally, as the registration process moves forward.

10. (SBU) The SECV officials told us that the organization has 1032 churches from Quang Tri in the Central region to Ca Mau in the Mekong Delta. Of those, roughly 400 are GVN-recognized. The SECV places its churches in three categories: those with a building, pastor and financial self-sufficiency; those with a building and a pastor but dependent on the SECV organization for financial support; and "satellite" or "sub-branch" churches that lack an official pastor, building or financial self-sufficiency. The SECV leaders told us that the vast majority of unrecognized SECV churches are in the Central Highlands; the majority of these are house churches or "meeting points" that operate as a branch or satellite of a recognized church. The SECV leaders told us that the SECV has made some progress in Gia Lai, Dak Nong and Binh Phuoc (the latter technically is not part of the Central Highlands, but has a predominantly ethnic minority SECV membership) in securing local government recognition of new churches and receiving permission to operate satellite churches. In Lam Dong province the situation varies from district to district. However, in Dak Lak province, other than four recognized churches, no other SECV facility has been allowed to operate. They admit that their ability to monitor the state of the SECV in Dak Lak is extremely limited, as Dak Lak SECV representatives routinely are denied permission to travel within the province. (A province-by-province breakdown for SECV churches in the Central Highlands is listed in appendix A.)

House Church Movement: cautious but positive

11. (SBU) We met with four leaders representing the Protestant house church movement throughout Vietnam: the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF), the Christian Interfellowship Church (CIC), the Vietnam Good News Mission (VGNM) and the Christian Fellowship of Vietnam (CFV). The VEF claims to have over 2,000 house churches and 200,000 worshipers; the CIC 1,511 house churches with over 150,000 members; the CFV claims 500 house churches with 50,000 members. The VGNM says it supports 671 house churches and focuses much of its efforts on ethnic minorities in the Northern and Central Highlands. The majority of the VGNM churches are affiliated with the SECV and ECVN.

12. (SBU) The house church leaders acknowledged improvement in religious freedom in Vietnam in recent months. Meetings with local officials are "warmer and more relaxed." The vast majority of their house churches now are able to operate without police harassment, particularly in non-ethnic minority areas. In one notable case in an HCMC suburb, a chagrined policeman actually apologized to the pastor of a house church for attempting to stop a service the previous Sunday.

¶13. (SBU) However, religious freedom violations persist, particularly in the Northwest Highlands province of Lao Cai and the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak. According to the VGNM pastor, in November and December 2004 in Lao Cai the members of five ethnic Hmong house churches reportedly were pressured to renounce their faith. As a result, 22 Hmong families fled to Dak Lak, Dak Nong and Binh Thuan provinces in the south, where they face an uncertain future. The CFV leader related another incident, where 19 house churches and 3,000 ethnic Hmong from Thanh Hoa Province in northern Vietnam relocated to Dak Nong Province to avoid harassment. Other church leaders described incidents in the central province of Phu Yen and in the Mekong Delta province of Ca Mau where hard-line village and district-level officials attempted to force house churches to close and declared that Protestantism is a U.S. plot to undermine the Party.

¶14. (SBU) The house church leaders welcomed the PM's order on Protestantism, although they believed it was more a ploy to avoid CPC sanctions than a fundamental change of GVN approach toward religion. Nonetheless, they hope to be able to legalize their status, but are hesitant to act until the GVN ensures that the procedures for doing so are clear and consistent across Vietnam. They also await the issuance of the implementation guidelines for the Ordinance on Religion. The house church leaders expressed concern that the GVN would try and manipulate the new legal framework to encourage house churches to join the GVN-recognized SECV or its Hanoi counterpart, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN).

The Mennonites

¶15. (SBU) Le Thi Phu Dung, wife of the imprisoned Mennonite leader Pastor Quang, told us that her church welcomes the PM's order on Protestantism; her church would consider applying for normalization of status, but was doubtful that such an application would be approved. She said that her church continues to face police harassment and that worshipers are being intimidated. Her Mennonite organization also is grappling with an internal schism as a rival pastor has broken away from Quang's organization to form a separate Mennonite church. (Dung's update on the condition of her husband and that of the apparently mentally ill Mennonite prisoner Le Thi Hong Lien are reported septel.)

¶16. (SBU) Comment: The SECV, Vietnam's single largest Protestant organization, and key leaders of the house church movement are responding positively, albeit cautiously, to GVN overtures. They are not looking for specific numbers of churches to be recognized under the PM's Order on Protestantism. Rather, they hope that the Ordinance on Religion, its implementation guidelines and the PM's Order on Protestantism will create a positive legal framework that streamlines the hodgepodge of conflicting, overlapping and restrictive rules that govern religious practice in Vietnam. Ideally, such a legal framework would minimize the discretion of local officials and have a clear appeals process. The end result of having such a system in place would be greater numbers of house churches registered and afforded the opportunity to apply for full GVN recognition. End Comment.

Appendix A: SECV Churches in the Central Highlands

Gia Lai: 70,784 worshipers in 150 churches of which 17 or 18 are recognized by the GVN. (Note: the head of the SECV board in Gia Lai told us the SECV has over 75,000 worshipers and roughly 440 churches and "meeting points.")

Dak Lak: 98,358 worshipers in 204 churches, of which 4 are recognized. (Note: the SECV board in Dak Lak told us there were nearly 125,000 worshipers in 400+ churches and "meeting points.")

Dak Nong: 24,242 worshipers in 82 churches, of which 1 is GVN-recognized.

Lam Dong: 64,946 worshipers in 230 churches, of which 10 are GVN-recognized.

Kontum: 480 worshipers in four churches, none are GVN-recognized.

Binh Phuoc: 61,542 members in 150 churches, of which 3 are GVN-recognized. (Note that while Binh Phuoc technically is not considered part of the Central Highlands, the SECV tells us its membership there is predominately ethnic minority.)

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